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AUTHOR Barnes, Nigel I.
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ABSTRACT

Beginning students of English as a second language want to have a natural use of the language to get things done, express thoughts, and get information. Most English learners have to invent an interlanguage to express time, because most language courses focus only on the present tense at first. A cyclical approach to grammar instruction allows the teacher to teach similar constructions in gradually less restricted tenses. Each lesson incorporates review of previous material and expansion to new material. Beginners receive material in three areas simultaneously: structures and vocabulary, presented in question-and-answer sequences when appropriate; classroom language used by the teacher; and everyday words and phrases. Some other principles of the approach include using contrast to emphasize a grammatical point; early introduction of interrogatives; early introduction of phonetics; early use of plurals; and the overriding principle of usefulness of material. (MSE)

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What Do Beginners Really Want?

Nigel I. Barnes

Language is a means of human communication.

What do beginners in English want to do? To use the language in a natural way, as they would their own. What is language for? To get things done; to express one's thoughts, feelings and wishes and to ask about those of others; to get information. Unlike animals, people operate in past and future as well as present; yet most courses practise the present - often with a wealth of vocabulary - long before the student learns to say Were you here yesterday? (Have you ever tried to carry on a conversation using only the present?) The introduction of modals also tends to come rather late. Those needing English for daily life have to invent an interlanguage - Why you no come yesterday? Is necessary I come tomorrow? No is possible I see you next week. When the teacher eventually teaches the past, the expression of necessity, or whatever, he or she faces remedial work with students who, unconsciously no doubt, have come to look upon 'classroom English' as something that does not work so well as the 'English' they have constructed for themselves.

Ways of viewing progress

Commonly, language-learning is seen as an upward process. One goes from a lower to a higher level. The learner mounts a series of steps; for example: first step - present simple/continuous, second step - future with will (or maybe with going to or am --ing), third step - past simple, and so on. The student practises each step before mounting the next, receiving a little grammar at a time, with a lot of vocabulary. Not until some time has passed can students carry on even a very simple normal conversation.

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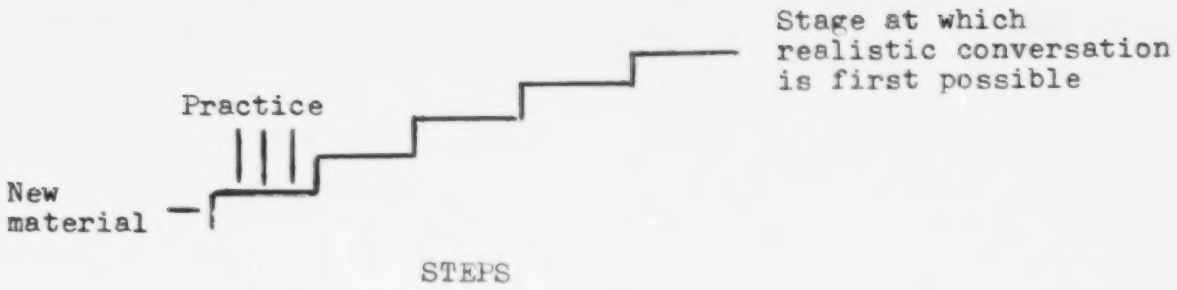
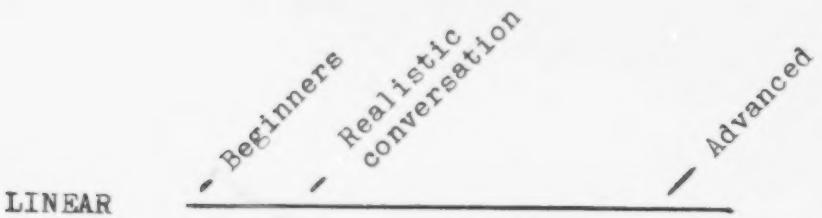
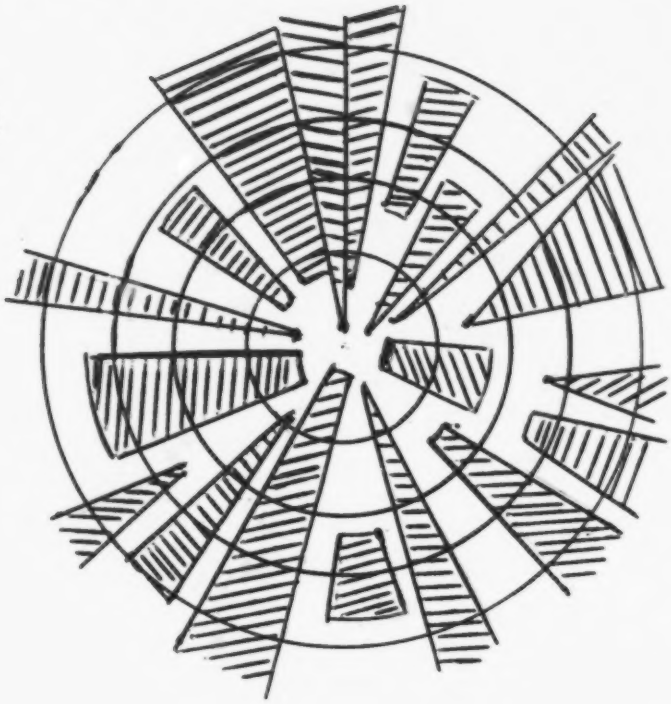


STEPS



LINEAR

CIRCLES



The Circles approach is one form of a cyclical approach.

Or progress can be seen as linear: one advances along the road of English, collecting words and structures on the way.

In place of the 'steps' and linear approaches I suggest a concentric-circles approach. One asks not 'How high are you?' or 'How far have you got?' but 'What zone or band are you in?' The beginner, at the centre, receives a variety of simple grammar and a very restricted vocabulary. The teacher presents these in clear contexts which, as far as possible, concern the students' own lives. This view sees the acquiring of English as an expanding network in which one can, in spite of one's great ignorance while still at the centre, function in a real though highly restricted way from the start.

Grammatical expansion

To illustrate expansion of grammar (also of notion - in this case the notions are of time and existence) here is the way I introduce be.

First lesson

	I.	You.
Are you Carlos?	-	Yes.
	-	Yes, I am.
	-	No.
	-	No, I'm not.
then	-	No, I'm not. I'm Louis.
	-	No, I'm Louis.

Second lesson

There is a calendar on the board.

Will you be in London next year?

- Yes, I will.
- No, I won't.

Are you in Room Five today?

- Yes, I am.
- No, I'm not.

Were you in Brazil last year?

- Yes, I was.
- No, I wasn't.

Third lesson

- No, I won't. I'll be in Brazil.
- No, I'm not. I'm in Room Six.
- No, I wasn't. I was in Spain.

This, a little later, expands to:

Where were you yesterday?

When will you be in London again?

I wasn't here yesterday but I'll be here tomorrow.

Some artificiality is inevitable, but teachers should try not to ask questions to which they obviously know the answers (questions of the 'Am I a man or a woman?' type). And the answers should be true for the students who give them: in my beginners classes, for example, I do not know who's who when I first go in.

In the three lessons outlined above, each expansion incorporates revision and something new.

Modals

With modals the treatment varies. I give students a number of simple, common uses of different modals - Can you come tomorrow? / Sorry, I have to go now. / He might be in the office. and so on. Can first appears in the question-and-answer trio Can you ---?(for present or future) / Yes, I can. / No, I can't. Could for the past comes later. Have to first appears only in I have to -. (Confusion with possessive have is avoided by first teaching the latter in the forms Have you got ---? / Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. But I've got ---. I leave must till later, unless the class is sophisticated enough to understand the difference between must and have to introduced together. Must is not an easy word, especially if one tries it in negatives and interrogatives. Might - a useful modal which is easy to teach, I think, if one

uses face and body to show slight probability - first appears in I/he/she might be ---; might not comes much later, Might she/he ---? not at all (in conversation, interrogatives with several modals are probably commonest in the form Do you think she might/should/ought to/etc. --? One must be careful not to teach unnecessary forms just for the sake of grammatical completeness.)

Restriction of vocabulary

In the earliest stages I restrict vocabulary as follows:

Personal pronouns: I, you (representing the basic human relationship)

Verbs: be, have, do, come, go, can, plus certain others in the infinitive/imperative form only (see 'Streams' below)

WH-items: where, when, what

Adjectives: According to the needs of the class. Good is usually the first.

Adverbs: yes, no, not, very, now, here

Prepositions: in, to, of

Conjunctions: and, but

The first nouns are names of people and places; and time-adverbials - today, next week and so on - feature from the start.

Streams

Beginners receive material in three simultaneous streams:

1. Structures and vocabulary, presented in question-and-answer sequences where appropriate.
2. Classroom language used by the teacher: Please listen/look/speak/write. Again, please. Everybody, please. Please listen, don't speak. Good. Very good.
3. Everyday words and phrases: Hello. Bye-bye. Sorry. Thank you. Coffee, please. Yes, please. No, thank you. I don't know. How much? See you tomorrow. Have a good weekend./And you. These constitute a sort of simple phrase-book. Some phrases contain grammar that is not expanded until later: after the first few lessons, I give students phrases like Another two teas, please and Would you like a coffee?

Some other principles

1. Contrast. Often a word or structure is easier to understand in a situation of contrast - good/bad, Have you been to America?/When did you go? This is well known; but often contrast is used too little, as when the distinction between present and past is delayed, or too much, as when beginners get all the personal pronouns at once, or too much vocabulary.

2. Interrogatives first.

a. Beginners 'need to know' more often than they need to make statements. (See how many of the phrases in a traveller's phrase-book are questions).

b. Affirmatives and negatives are easier to understand if one introduces them in short answers to questions (see 'Grammatical expansion' above). Contrast is at work here.

c. In many languages one can ask questions with 'affirmative' grammar plus a special intonation. 'Interrogatives first' discourages learners from doing this in English - English people, why they drive on the left? ; You are Lulu, yes?

This is only a general principle; I do not teach Must you? to beginners at all.

3. Phonetics first.

I write all new words in phonetic symbols first, thus:

/ ai kn 'si: ju /
I can see you

Students need to 'see' the correct pronunciation, to have a pronunciation they can take out of the class with them and practise alone; they must not try to trust English spelling. The decline in the use of phonetic notation in course-books, no doubt under the influence of cassettes, is a serious loss. I find that very many students do not understand what weak forms are until they see them as, for example, /kn/, /ms/, /frm/ - can, must, from. Phonetics demonstrates when it is most needed - when one is starting the language - that mouth-English and book-English (to use the terms I use with beginners) are different languages (well, almost).

Of course, the teacher's own pronunciation should not be too different from the one indicated by the symbols!

4. Plurals first.

In general, nouns refer to concepts, not single objects. Some languages may not, for example, use the same word for a ball-pen and a fountain-pen, or for a person's leg, a dog's leg and the leg of a table. So I show a collection of obviously different pens - calling them pens - before taking one out and calling it a pen. One can use pictures or quick drawings on the board instead. - It is important for beginners to realise that they cannot always carry the categories of their own language over into English.

Giving plurals first may have other advantages. It may be easier to ask questions with plurals - Do you like cats? Can you buy Italian shoes in your country? And I think one can explain the two main functions of the indefinite article better via the plural: These people are women, these are girls. You're a woman, she's a girl. / There are some girls outside. They want to come in. There's a girl outside. She wants to come in.

It would be interesting to know whether the plurals or the singulars of countable nouns were the more frequent in one's own speech.

5. Usefulness.

This principle overrides the others.

What do beginners actually need? By listening to beginners trying to express themselves in English one can get a fair idea of what they need. But are they ready for certain things? How does one judge 'difficulty'? Sometimes, I suggest, something may be difficult if you go into it extensively but easy if you give just one simple example of it, an example which can be used in many situations. Reported speech seldom appears in books for beginners, but are sentences like She says she won't be here tomorrow and He says he didn't see Lulu last week

really too difficult? The structure '<u>Somebody says</u> plus a statement' is certainly useful.

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My beginners are in mixed-nationality classes; they are in London; I can only communicate with them in English. They cannot wait two or three months before learning to talk about yesterday. But even for learners not in a similar position, I think a 'circles' approach of some kind will make English more real, less of a classroom subject.

Based on a talk given in April 1986 at the conference in Brighton, England of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL).